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Analysing Minority Language Education Policy Process in China in Its Entirety

Anwei Feng and Mamtimyn Sunuodula

Abstract – Two main bodies of literature are identifiable in minority education policy studies in China. Many adopt a descriptive approach to examining policy documents and general outcomes in their historical contexts while others focus on evaluating preferential policies made to address inequality issues in minority education. In most discussions, educators and commentators analyse or speculate rationales behind minority education policies promulgated by governments at various levels in different periods, from top-level legislations such as the Constitution and other educational laws to local implementation guidelines. They contribute to general understanding of policy related issues for minority groups in the country. In these policy studies, particularly those into minority language education, however, few make attempts to develop a conceptual framework to make it possible to analyse the policy process in its entirety. Thus, there is hardly any discussion to define the relevant actors of a certain policy, to relate the policy to issues concerning these actors in the matrix of the social hierarchy, and to evaluate how policy outcomes feed back into the policy making and implementation cycle. The lack of such a model makes it difficult to achieve an in-depth understanding of the multifaceted and dynamic nature of minority language education policies. This paper, as the title suggests, proposes an analytical model that addresses these issues on the basis of a comparative analysis of bi/trilingual education policies for the minority groups, with a focus on a series of closely related policy documents that are intended to apply to both majority and minority groups, and their implementation with an overview of the literature related to three representative regions and empirical data collected from these regions.

Key words: Indigenous minority groups, bilingual education, trilingual education, policy studies models, policy process, case studies, China

Authors

Dr Anwei Feng Reader in Education College of Education & Lifelong Learning Bangor University BANGOR LL57 2PZ UK Email anwei.feng@bangor.ac.uk	Mr Mamtimyn Sunuodula Area Studies Librarian Durham University Library Stockton Road Durham DH1 3LY UK Email m.a.sunuodula@durham.ac.uk
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Analysing Minority Language Education Policy Process in China in Its Entirety

INTRODUCTION

In minority education policy studies in China, many tend to describe and evaluate in very general terms policies in their historical contexts while others are keen to interpret the underlining principles and rationales of special ‘preferential policies’ made for minority groups and debate on the pros and cons of these policies. Few make attempts to develop a conceptual model to make it possible to critically analyse the policy process in its entirety. For example, there is hardly any discussion to define who the relevant actors of a certain policy are; to relate the policy to issues concerning the actors in the matrix of the social hierarchy; and to evaluate how policy outcomes feed back into the policy life cycle. The lack of an analytical model for studying the policy process makes it difficult to gain an in-depth understanding of the multifaceted and dynamic nature of minority education policies. This paper, as the title suggests, aims to propose such an analytical framework to address these issues. The framework is built on the basis of a comparative analysis of minority language education policies, with a focus on a series of closely related policy documents that apply to both majority and minority groups, and their implementations through empirical data collected from three representative regions and an overview of the literature related to the regions.

AN OVERVIEW OF POLICY STUDIES

The literature on minority education policies shows that of many approaches followed by policy studies scholars two are predominant. The first is to describe and evaluate policy documents and the general outcomes in the historical contexts. This descriptive approach is popular not only among policy commentators in China but also those from outside the

country (Feng, 2007; Jin, 2002; Tiemuer & Liu, 2002; Wang, 1998a; 1998b; Zhou, 2003; 2004). Typically, they would give an account of the policies and their implementations in a certain region in three historical stages starting from 1949 when the P.R.C. was founded. In Li & Huang's (2004) terminology, the three stages are the 'start-up stage' from 1949 to 1965 when initial efforts were made to promote bilingualism and bilingual education; the 'stagnancy stage' from 1966 to 1976 when the initial work was interrupted by the Cultural Revolution during which assimilation mindset prevailed; and the 'recovery and development stage' from late 1970s till present when bi/trilingualism and bi/trilingual education are robustly promoted again. Some analysts divide the three stages even further, particularly the most recent stage, to give more detailed account of changes in the policy formulation and policy implementation process in response to socio-political changes. This descriptive approach, according to Xu (2006), manifests the belief that there is an intrinsic relationship between minority education policies and socio-political agendas and changes of the country. Despite its worthiness in showing development in general terms of policy making and implementation in specific historical contexts, we argue that studies following this approach assume that discernible effects (or lack of them) are attributed to a policy in its written form and these studies could hardly contribute to the understanding of the multifaceted and dynamic process involving all key actors or participants (see the next section for detail) in the policy cycle.

An equally substantial body of literature on policy studies shows a focus on interpretation and debates of what is usually called 'preferential policies' specially made for minority nationalities in different regions. These policies encourage affirmative actions, normally at regional levels for supporting minority groups in many aspects in education, including special investment on resources, preferential policies for minority students to gain access to higher education, policies to provide financial reward to teachers working in remote areas where minority groups dominate and policies to promote bilingual education (Tang, 2002). Many educators and scholars argue for preferential policies with principles stated in official documents and theories related to equality in education (Jirigala, 2001; Tang, 2002); others give overviews of international discussions on affirmative actions to make it possible for comparative studies (e.g., Ji, 2004; Liu, 2002); still others such as Teng &

Ma (2005) integrate the two approaches for making their arguments. What is in common in this body of literature is the affirmative tone to advocate preferential policies despite many issues identified in policy implementation. These issues include high costs, abuse of policies by the socioeconomic elite in both the minority majority groups (Teng & Ma, 2005), dependent mentality of minority groups (Jirigala, 2001; Li, 2005), loss of minority identity (Lin, 1997) and the negative 'labeling effects' (Qian, 2002) as a result of these policies. Discussions on preferential policies are without doubt the most thorough and rigorous if we look at them as a whole. However, many scholars are apparently too keen on theoretical rationalization, perhaps rightly as there are voices against the policies, and empirical evidence on the policy process and outcomes remains anecdotal because they are rarely studied empirically.

In his overview of minority policy studies, Xu (2006) lists a few other types of discussion besides the two main bodies of literature. Some theorists, according to Xu (ibid.), tend to discuss policies by categorising them according to their objectives and functions in terms of nation building and stratifying them from legislations made at the top level, such as the Constitution and educational laws, to local guidelines for policy implementation (Wang, 2003; Yang, 1999). Some others analyse and rationalise minority policies promulgated by governments at various levels (Jin, 2002; Wu & Xu, 2006). In the People's Republic era, Wu & Xu (2006) assert that policies on minority education can be rationalised with theories related to equality in nationalities and in education and they are made with the aim to diminish gaps between majority and minority nationalities. Xu (2006) critiques this body of policy studies literature stating that most rationalisation is done with Party's doctrines and other policy documents and there is a lack of variety of perspectives.

The overview clearly suggests that educators and theorists are inclined to discuss policies in general terms in relation to socio-political changes, supreme principles as specified in national legislations, nation-building agendas of the country, as well as theories for policy studies. Very few seem to have conducted in-depth investigation of the entire process of a specific policy and there is no theoretical model developed to study the interrelationships between the key actors in the policy process and, according to Spolsky (2004), between

various linguistic and non-linguistic factors (socio-political, demographic, psychological, cultural, bureaucratic and so on). A simple descriptive or cause-and-effect approach that examines only a few variables is unlikely to produce a useful account of language policy embedded in a complex 'real world' of contextual variables (Spolsky, 2004: 6-7).

The complexity and dynamics of policy making and implementation can be illustrated by the series of English language education policies which were promulgated in 2001 to all schools and tertiary institutions throughout the country. Against the backdrop of China's successful bid for the 2008 Summer Olympics and its successful application for the membership of the World Trade Organisation, three educational policy documents were disseminated in the same year by the Ministry of Education to promote English language education all over the country. One was issued to all primary schools (Ministry ..., 2001a) stipulating that English provision was to start from Year 3 in all primary schools by the autumn of 2002. On the premise that primary school leavers should achieve 'Level 2' in English (see Fig. 1), the second set up specific English standards for secondary schools, 'Level 5' for junior secondary school leavers and 'Level 8' for senior secondary school leavers (Ministry ..., 2001b). All levels are defined in detail in the documents. The third was intended for tertiary institutions (Ministry ..., 2001c). It stipulates that 5-10% of the tertiary courses for undergraduate be conducted in English within three years. All three policy documents are claimed to be formulated with extensive consultations with experts and educators and are intended to apply nationwide.

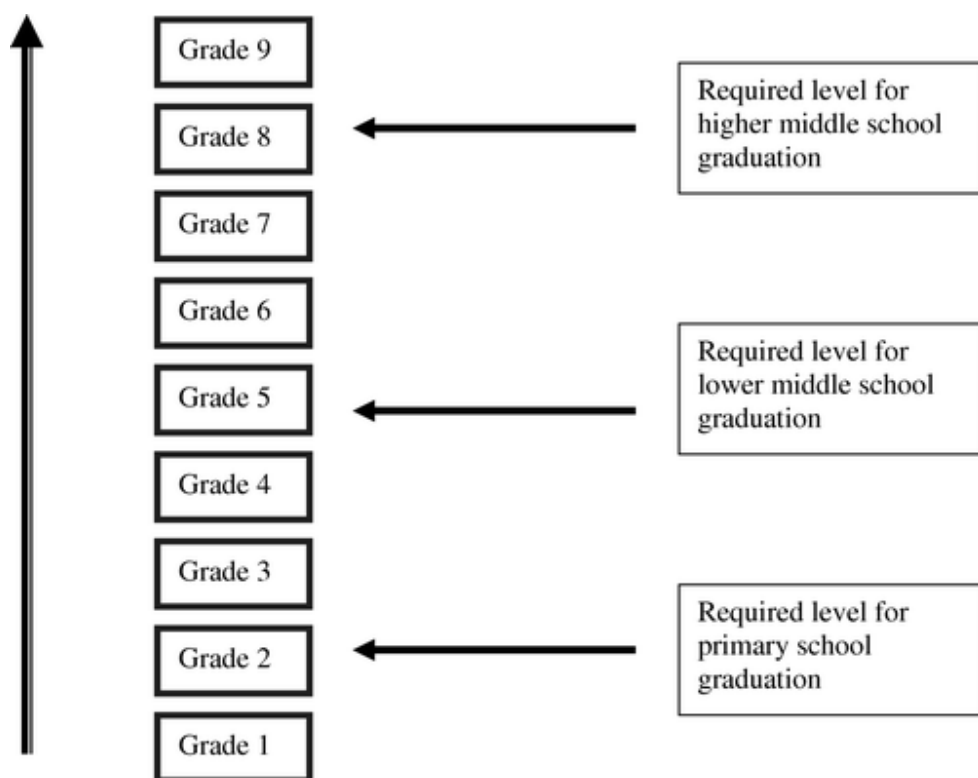


Figure 1. English proficiency levels from primary up to secondary school graduation (Source Ministry of Education 2001a, 2001b).

In 2002, however, the State Council issued a directive on minority language education with a statement that implicitly excluded minority groups from the promotion of English language education. The directive (*State Council*, 2002) states that, in bilingual education, ‘the relationship between the minority language and the Mandarin Chinese should be correctly managed. ... English should be offered in regions where favourable conditions exist’. The directive offers no explanation to how ‘correct management’ is defined and what ‘favourable conditions’ are. Despite the incompatibility in the policy documents, in minority education, the past few years have seen a growing literature of the notions of *Sanyu Jiantong* (trilingualism or mastery of three languages: the minority home language, Chinese and English) and *Sanyu Jiaoyu* (trilingual education). While some reports (e.g., Jing, 2007; Wang, 2000) show optimism about trilingualism and trilingual education for indigenous minority pupils, most commentators and practitioners list difficulties minority students face in learning English, from lack of resources to cognitive, affective and socio-

cultural problems minority pupils experience in learning a foreign language (Ju, 2000; Li, 2003; Tian, 2001, Wu, 2002; Xiang *et al.*, 2005).

This example clearly supports the argument that policy should not be seen simply as an end-product for descriptive and cause-and-effect analysis in their written form but also as a process in which policy is continuously being made and re-made (Bell and Stevenson, 2006; Taylor *et al.*, 1997). An in-depth understanding requires rigorous research into the dynamic and multifaceted process of policy generation, implementation, regeneration and negotiation between relevant actors or participants in the matrix of the social hierarchy in which each has the potential power to insert an influence or effect on the policy (Trowler, 1998). These actors in the UK system (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987; Trowler, 1998), for example, include policy makers at the national level, the Local Educational Authorities (LEAs) at the regional level, school heads and co-ordinators at the local level, teachers in the classroom and finally pupils who may balance time and effort with risks and rewards. At the top of the hierarchy, in policy formation, policy makers balance a host of linguistic and non-linguistic variables and exercise state ideology as well as personal philosophy of education. At the implementation stage, regional or local actors may adapt policies, e.g., by watering them down or carrying them farther than intended. Hence, for this paper, the first two questions we should answer are what the most relevant variables and actors or participants are with regard to the English language education policies promulgated in 2001. This is logically the starting point for our discussion.

ACTORS AND FACTORS IN THE POLICY PROCESS

The literature on minority education in China as a whole implicitly corresponds with the actor list given by Reynolds & Saunders (1987) and Trowler (1998) except that few seem to pay adequate attention to pupils themselves. Indeed, the neglect of these actors who are the end-receivers of the policies is clearly evident and is a key impetus for our empirical research and for this paper. However, there are other factors that are equally significant in policy studies. Education sociologists such as Levin (1980) and Torres (1989) remind us

that the process of policy formulation and implementation could be highly influenced by external factors which include the intellectual, institutional and ideological atmosphere where policy decisions are made. The analysis of policy formation and implementation should thus be multidimensional, taking into account both the key actors and contextual factors. In the analysis, it is important to emphasise the educational outcomes, such as the skills and knowledge gained and attitudes developed through the educational process, and the social outcomes manifested in various forms such as market competitiveness, cultural attributes, political behaviour, and alienation or inclusion, as these policy outcomes will feed back into the polity, the uppermost level of public policy formation. On the basis of these insights, particularly the highly stimulating model offered by Levin (1980), a policy studies framework is formulated for this study (Figure 1). Similar to the policy trajectory study approach (Lingard & Garrick, 1997), this framework is developed to assess policy initiatives in their entirety, particularly the relationships between the major actors in the education policy process including policy makers at various government levels, policy implementers in schools and classrooms and pupils themselves.

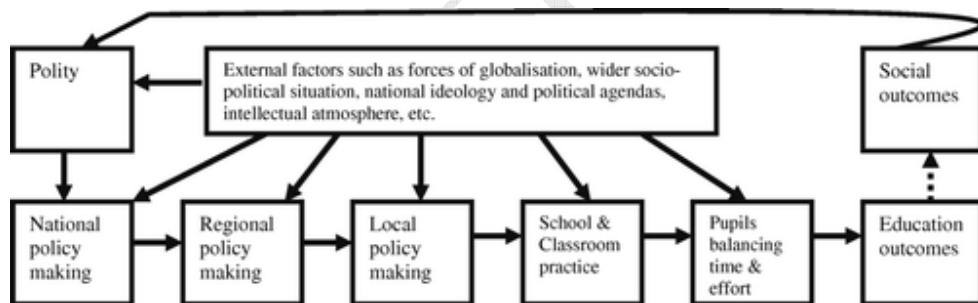


Figure 2. An analytical framework for minority educational policies in China.

This framework shows the relationship between relevant actors in the minority education policy process in China. They are similar to those listed in Reynolds & Saunders (1987) and Trowler (1998) with one addition, i.e., the regional policy makers. As shown in the pages that follow, in minority autonomous regions, education policies are often made by the regional government, at least in theory. Local-level policies below regional policies refer to implementation guidelines of national or regional policies made by autonomous prefecture or county level governments. This framework indicates that all relevant actors or participants in the policy process are subject to external influences and the educational

outcomes may directly feed back into another policy cycle or through social outcomes. The dotted line between educational and social outcomes indicates our doubt about the direct link between the two as social outcomes may originate from any part of a society with schools forming only part of the society.

CASE STUDIES

Once we have identified the key actors and contextual factors in the policy process, we are in a better position to conduct the analysis of the policies related to English language education for the minority groups. As China has a huge minority population consisting of 55 minority groups, for generalisability to any kind, it is necessary to make a comparison of a few indigenous minority groups that can represent minority groups in certain ways. Three indigenous minority groups were chosen: Uyghur in Xinjiang, Zhuang in Guangxi and Yi in Sichuan. These three represent minority groups with respects to such factors as geographical location (see Figure 3) and degree of integration with the Han, the majority nationality. Each of the three represents one type of ‘minority communities’ as defined by Zhou (2000; 2001) according to the history of utilisation of writing systems for native languages and their access to bilingual education: with Uyghur categorised as a Type 1 community; Yi as a Type 2 community; and Zhuang as a Type 3 community. For more background information for the three cases, see Feng & Sunuodula (in press).

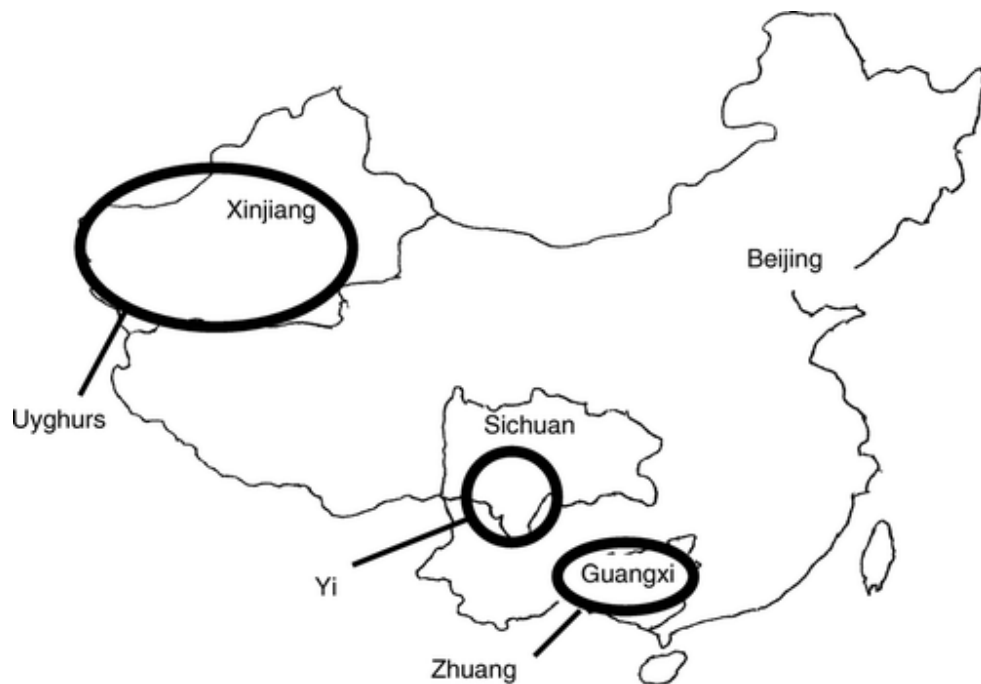


Figure 3. Geographical locations of Zhuang, Uyghur and Yi minority nationalities.

Data for the study¹ are drawn from field visits to the three locations undertaken in 2006, which involved interviews and discussions with a group of students and teachers; from official policy documents issued by the central, provincial and local governments; and from a review of relevant secondary sources. The overview of each case consists of two parts: one on bilingual education policies for that case and the other on English language education. The purpose of reviewing the former is to help understand the unique features of the policy process of the latter. The empirical research was carried out on a moderate scale, targeting a group of minority students in universities for minority nationalities in the capital cities of Guangxi, Sichuan, and Xinjiang. The methodology used was what is usually called the narrative study approach (Josselson, 1996; Plummer, 2001), similar to the oral history method used in Postiglione, *et al.*'s (2007) research in Tibet. In such an approach, interviewees, given their experience and age, are interviewed to recollect their previous experience in earlier life and are encouraged to reflect the effects of earlier life on current situations. The emphasis of the interviews was on the students' experience in language use and second and third language learning in primary and secondary schools and their views on the current situation they were in. The target group were primarily

minority students, but the data were complemented by a moderate number of interviews with a convenient sample of teachers.

The Zhuang in Guangxi

The policy for Zhuang-Han bilingual education is a sixteen-character catchphrase which essentially means ‘Give priority to Zhuang and become masters of Zhuang and Han’. The slogan sounding policy is often cited in publications and mass media but its source has not been acknowledged. This is due to the fact that policy documents concerning Zhuang Language were debated, proposed and revised numerous times but were never formally promulgated and implemented (Huang, 2006). As Chairman of the Minority Nationality Committee of the Region’s People’s Congress, Huang takes this as clear manifestation of negligence of the rights of minority groups, which severely affects the implementation of the Law for Nationality Autonomous Regions promulgated by the nation state. The lack of official policies pertaining to Zhuang results in very limited provision of bilingual programmes in most schools where Zhuang pupils attend. Some remote primary schools where Zhuang children dominate usually adopt a transitional model in which Zhuang is used as the medium of instruction in the first few years but, from Year 4 onwards, Han replaces Zhuang as the teaching language. This is, in Baker’s (2006) term, a weak form of bilingual education that would usually results in subtractive bilingualism in which the majority language replaces or demotes the minority language both in the society and in individuals due to the coercive power relationship of the two languages. The subtraction is clearly illustrated in Xu’s (2000) survey among Zhuang college students, the cream of the minority group. She reported that none of them claimed to know the Zhuang language.

English used to be taught as a foreign language from junior secondary schools onwards in Guangxi. Traditionally, the implicit policy in foreign language education is to follow the general trend: that is, using standard textbooks compiled by national textbook companies, following the national system of assessment and adopting traditional grammar-translation methodology in language teaching (Yang, 2003). Not surprisingly, the regional education

authority in Guangxi, like other provinces, responded to the official policies (*Ministry ...*, 2001a; 2001b; 2001c) with strategic plans to promote English language education. The regional document (*Guangxi ...*, 2002), for example, lists detailed objectives for tertiary institutions and measures to achieve them. Major cities and towns in Guangxi, like many other cities in China, have begun to offer English at the primary level. Implementation of the policies is also evident in Zhuang dominated areas such as Baise (Zhang, *et al.*, 2006). Special funds were made available for the area to provide training programmes for both primary and secondary school teachers of English. Zhang, *et al.*, also report that regular links with major cities such as Guangzhou are established and other plans are made by the local government to better serve the need in the remote areas.

There is a considerable literature showing that Zhuang pupils often have more difficulties learning English than their Han counter-parts (Xu, 2000). One reason is that as qualified English teachers are usually Han they use Chinese as the classroom language to teach English. Limited proficiency in Chinese thus becomes an obstacle for Zhuang pupils to understand explanations and affects acquisition of the foreign language. This has led to the argument for using Zhuang as Zhongjieyu², the classroom language to teach and learn English (Xu, 2000; Yang, 2003). A second reason given for Zhuang pupils' difficulty in learning English is that there is a negative transfer from Zhuang to English as its phonological system is perceived to differ more than Han Chinese from standard English pronunciation. Poor pronunciation affects pupils' self esteem and causes loss of confidence in participating in classroom activities (Huang, 2007; Lu, 1999).

The empirical data apparently support and further complement the published findings in terms of second and third language provision and learning in schools. Zhuang student interviewees from cities or major towns reported that Chinese usually started from the beginning of schooling. Others from remote areas stated that they started school using their home language as the medium of instruction and Chinese from Year 3 or Year 4 in primary schools onwards. It is worth noting that 'using the home language as the teaching medium' does not necessarily mean the textbooks are also in the home language. A Zhuang teacher (Zhuang-T 3) said that many schools such as the one he attended do use

textbooks written in Zhuang for the first few years; some student interviewees asserted that this is not always the case. A male student in business management talked about the domains in language use this way,

... At that time [primary school], we spoke Zhuang at home; teachers spoke Zhuang as well, but our textbooks were in Chinese. The teacher who taught us Chinese often talked to us in Zhuang but sometimes she read the text in Chinese. Her pronunciation was funny.... In secondary school in our county, many students spoke GuiLiuHua or Putonghua. When we [Zhuang pupils] met, we spoke *Zhuang dialect*, like the other Guangxi Chinese students who spoke GuiLiuHua ... (Zhuang-S 05, our translation and emphasis).

It is also important to note that this student perceived Zhuang as a dialect, a sub-category of the Chinese language. It is hard to expect pupils in this situation to develop literacy in their home language, which might help explain why subtractive bilingualism was found to take place among Zhuang students in Xu's (2000) survey. A female student majoring in mass media went even further to call Chinese 'mother tongue'.

... from junior secondary school till now, we always use Chinese as the medium of instruction for all subject learning, including English learning. Chinese is our mother tongue (*Muyu*), so it is better than Zhuang as the instruction and learning language (Zhuang-S 07):

The perception of Chinese as mother tongue was not as representative as the perception of Zhuang as a dialect according to the data. Both, however, help explain why Zhuang is rarely taken seriously as the linguistic identity of this largest minority nationality group and why many Zhuang adult students can speak Zhuang but few are literate.

Regarding minority students' views of English language provision, three questions asked in the interviews were: 1) whether it would be better to have English textbooks written with their mother tongue and to learn English using Zhuang as *Zhongjieyu*; 2) whether it would be better to have minority language speaking teachers to teach them English; and 3) whether they see themselves as disadvantaged in the nation-wide promotion of English language education. To the first question, surprisingly, all Zhuang interviewees, with few

exceptions, rejected using Zhuang as Zhongjeyu to learn English, showing no support for the argument by Xu (2000) and Yang (2003). Chinese, according to most interviewees, has been the working language at all stages of schooling. A typical reply was:

No, Chinese is always the Zhongjeyu in our schools. We don't know Zhuang so will not understand textbooks written in Zhuang. The use of Chinese as Zhongjeyu can benefit us most, not only in English learning but also in Chinese learning. This is because some of us do not speak good Chinese because of our *dialect*. (Zhuang-S 11, my emphasis)

Views on whether they preferred Zhuang teachers varied vastly. Some liked Han English teachers better than Zhuang teachers for they thought the pronunciation of the former was usually better; some did not feel much difference between the two; and one claimed he had no idea whether his teachers were Han or Zhuang and he did not care. A female mass media student commented,

I was taught by Zhuang English teachers in junior and senior secondary schools. I think they all did very well. Perhaps because they were Zhuang they knew exactly what we were weak at and found ways to deal with our weaknesses. (Zhuang-S 05).

Their views of the challenges of English language learning, the third question, were quite similar in that most appear to accept the common perception that Zhuang students have more difficulty in pronunciation but they refuse to accept that they are disadvantaged in this nation-wide campaign to learn English:

No, I don't think so, because these years [Zhuang] pupils start learning English from primary school onwards. In Guangxi, like elsewhere, cities and major towns attach importance to English language teaching. Some pupils even start from kindergarten. (Zhuang-S 02).

Another student suggested that motivation is the key and stated that disadvantage may result from failing to face the challenge:

Disadvantage may not be in the learning itself but it is possible if you are afraid of competition. English is a must for today's society. It is a skill for all students, minority students included. (Zhuang-S 21).

The Uyghur in Xinjiang

Of many language policies officially promulgated in recent decades, the ones with most impact include the five-year plan of language reform issued in 1985 (cited in Blachford, 2004) and a recent Region-level document promulgated by the Xinjiang government on promotion of 'bilingual education' (Ministry of Education, 2004). Against the backdrop of restoration of traditional written scripts of Uyghur and Kazak and a relatively liberal period for bilingual education after the death in 1976 of the former paramount leader, Mao Zedong, the 1985 document asserted that within five years all school teachers and administrators in the Region were required to use Chinese in all formal domains such as meetings and classrooms. All secondary school leavers were to be made communicative in Chinese. This meant that minority pupils, most of whom had previously begun learning Mandarin Chinese in secondary school, now had to start it in Year 3 at primary school as well as receiving further instruction later in secondary school, and in university for those who are fortunate enough to attend it. The 2004 'bilingual learning' document goes further by asserting that Mandarin Chinese be made the primary or the sole language of instruction in elementary and middle school classrooms. 'Bilingual education' has come to mean that Chinese is *the* medium of instruction from primary school onwards and minority languages are to be relegated to a school subject. Implementation measures of the policy are specific and rigid. In Khotan County where 96.4% of the population is Uyghur, it is stated in the county government document that students must be able to communicate in Chinese and achieve Level 4 in the Chinese proficiency test (known as HSK) by the end of compulsory education. Specific levels of Chinese proficiency are also listed for minority teachers working in primary and secondary schools. Those who fail to reach the specified levels in specified time spans will be replaced or forced out of the teaching profession (*Khotan ...*, 2004).

Recent development has made Mandarin in schools not a choice but an imposition which ignores a number of relevant issues, including identity, by invoking economic theory and could trigger a reaction of resistance (Schluessel, 2007). It is worth noting, however, that

another document issued later in the same year by the People's Government of Xinjiang (*Xinjiang ...*, 2004) addressed itself first to the 'Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture' and had a tone that appeared less rigid. Schluessel (2007) speculates that the details for implementation of the policy might be negotiable on a local basis, even though how far they can be negotiated is unclear.

Xinjiang is probably one of the regions with the most limited provision of English in the country and is simply kept out of the system. The opportunity to learn English in schools is just not available. Wu (2000) reports that the absolute majority of minority students at tertiary institutions had reportedly never taken any English lessons and had to start from scratch. Seven years later, Olan (2007) conducted a survey among 618 minority students at the most prestigious university in Xinjiang and found that even there 62% of them had had no English learning experience at all. There is no evidence to suggest that regional or county level governments have responded to the 2001 policy documents by the Ministry of Education with any strategic plans for enhancing English provision. Instead, at tertiary institutions, there are special policies such as exempting minority students from taking the nationwide College English Test 4 but requiring them to pass the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) for admission and graduation (Yang, 2005).

However, there are some educators who argue for English language provision to minority pupils from primary school onwards (Han, 2001; Olan, 2007). Some also critiques the use of textbooks intended for the majority Chinese speakers and the practice of using Chinese as *Zhongjiejyu* in English teaching. There are suggestions that curricula should be specially designed and more minority teachers of English be trained to meet the special needs of minority pupils (Han, 2001).

The interview data in general correspond to what is reported in the literature. Chinese is usually introduced to Uyghur dominated schools from Year 3 but it may remain as a school subject from that point onwards. Textbooks used are in Uyghur and the medium of instruction is Uyghur. Because of the co-existence of *Min Kao Min* and *Min Kao Han* systems, some economically privileged parents had the option of sending their children to

Chinese or Uyghur school. A fifth-year sociology interviewee told the researcher that his sister once attended a Chinese medium school but later transferred to a Uyghur medium school because of her parents' strong consciousness of Uyghur identity (Uyghur-S 2). However, this situation looks bound to change. One male student said,

The Mayor of Kashgar promised to have all schools teach in Chinese by 2010 ... The children seem to be learning only the (Chinese) language, nothing else. Many parents are resistant to having their children taught only in Chinese. There is a conflict of language learning and subject learning. Only Chinese language and culture will not benefit the students much. (Uyghur-S 04)

This remark confirmed that Khotan as mentioned in the overview above is not the only place that showed exceptional keenness to promote Chinese language. The impact on the existing system in which Uyghur is still allowed to be the main medium of instruction in the Uyghur dominated prefectures or counties remains to be seen.

While the feelings towards Chinese learning varied, the Uyghur students seemed to have a strong motivation to learn the English language:

I noted that motivation to learn English is very strong among Uyghur students, unlike that in learning Chinese. ... Chinese students started early and Uyghur students started late, but they often got the same exam marks in subjects taught in English. There was a class [module] on Islamic History conducted in English. Uyghur students understood it better. The high marks surprised the Han students and the teacher ... Uyghur students from the country usually *find obligatory Chinese learning difficult but they learn English spontaneously*. (Uyghur-S 06, our emphasis)

The views on Zhongjieyu, the explanatory language used in classrooms, held by Uyghur students appeared just the opposite to those held by Zhuang students, the remarks made by a female Uyghur student majoring in English were representative.

Yes, I think the use of mother tongue as the explanatory language in classrooms and textbooks will bring about better results. Students can use the mother tongue to learn grammar, to recite vocabulary, and this helps memorise things easily. (Uyghur-S 8)

However, some were hesitant. A year-4 male in journalism gave this explanation:

... There is a practical problem here. In exams, there is always a part that asks us to translate English into Chinese. This is where Uyghur students who are not good at Chinese lose points (marks). What can you do? (Uyghur-S 7)

One of the most noteworthy findings is that some Uyghur students seemed to have a desire to compete with the majority students but felt it was not possible because at school they had not been given the same opportunities to learn the language:

... When I was at primary and secondary schools, there was no English offered to us. So at the university, I had to learn English all by myself. I found myself quite confident. Unfortunately, I had to drop the language because of other pressures. ... However, I feel that if Uyghur students are *put on equal footing* with Han students, we can compete with them. (Uyghur-S 01, a fourth-year history female, our emphasis)

This sense of being on unequal footing with the majority Han students and thus of being disadvantaged seemed to prevail among Uyghur interviewees:

Learning English is also important for employment because some employers require it [English]. I self-teach myself English and I am also a class representative of the English class. However, I am *not very optimistic about the future employment situation* (Uyghur-S 02).

Despite high motivation and efforts made in learning English, this student was anxious about the job market. When asked how the issue could be addressed, quite a few gave a clear reply, i.e., 'to start early'.

It [English language teaching] should start early and the time allocated to this subject should be substantial. Now in remote areas, children do not even have any idea what English is. (Uyghur-S 10)

The Yi in Liangshan, Sichuan

The third case is the Yi nationality group who primarily live in rural, mountainous areas of Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi. The Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan is the biggest concentrated community of Yi of about two million and many of them live in rather isolated and mountainous areas. Despite strong political, cultural and

economic influence of the Chinese community and rapid changes in the region, research shows that the majority of Yi are conscious of their cultural and linguistic identities and keen to maintain them. This can be illustrated by Pu's (2004) description of the tussle, similar to that in Xinjiang, between traditional Yi and the imposed pinyin Yi language created and imposed on them in the 1950s and by evidence of emotional attachment of local teachers in Liangshan to the traditional written language (Teng, 2000a). Traditional Yi was reinstalled in 1980 after more than two decades of failed attempt to make it fade away. The reinstallation document, the Scheme of the Standard Yi Writing, proved to be a major policy that became an important guiding document to deal with illiteracy and improve minority education in general (Pu, 2004; Zhu & Xiao, 2005).

With regard to bilingual education, according to Pu (2004), a guiding document was issued in 1985 by the Sichuan provincial government and it explicitly stipulated that two models be adopted in minority dominated counties and prefectures. In 'the first model', the minority language is used as the medium of instruction with Chinese as a school subject, whereas in 'the second model' the roles of the minority language and Chinese are reversed. Teng (2000b) divides the Liangshan Prefecture into three zones according to language use and the two models for bilingual education. In the first zone where Chinese is the dominant language for communication, mainly the capital city and major towns in the prefecture, the second model is the norm with Chinese as the teaching medium and Yi as a school subject. In the third zone where Yi is used for communication, usually in the most isolated and remote areas in Liangshan, the first model is adopted with Yi as the teaching medium and Chinese a school subject. In the second zone, mixed communities of Chinese and Ti language speakers, both Chinese and Yi are used in daily interactions; schools adopt either the first model or the second model. In reality, Teng (2000a, 2000b) observes that there is strong resistance from local cadres and intellectuals against the teaching of the Yi language. The second model is often the norm and is spreading in the third zone. Many key schools in the first and second zones pay lip service to minority language teaching. Of the key reasons listed by Teng (2000b) is the pressure for pupils to take the nation-wide examinations at critical stages, such as the exam for entrance into university. Another factor is the strong economic pressure on young Yi persons to learn

and use the majority language for life opportunities. He predicts that the current situation seems to suggest that within two generations Chinese will become the lingua franca of Yi both in oral communication and in literacy.

In sharp contrast with the literature on Yi-Han bilingual education, there is little written on foreign language provision in schools. According to Li's (2003) survey in a regional university for nationalities, English provision starts from senior secondary school. This suggests that English is simply unavailable to Yi pupils during the nine-year compulsory education which ends prior to senior secondary school. In some elite schools for minority nationalities in major cities in the region, pupils start English when they enter the junior secondary (Xiao, 2003). In a needs analysis survey among a mixed group of Yi and Han secondary and tertiary students, Cao and Xiang (2006) found that surprisingly Yi students showed more interest in learning English than Han students and expressed preference for the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach to traditional grammar-translation methodology which is exam oriented and preferred only by the Han students. Because of the absence of or late 'low-quality' English provision in most Yi schools, Cao and Xiang argue for the use of the CLT approach to teaching Yi students at university and aiming at the lower level than that required by the syllabus. Interesting is Li's (2003) and Xiao's (2003) argument for using Yi as *Zhongjieyu* instead of Chinese. They believe that mother tongue explanation facilitates pupils' understanding and motivates them to learn. In one school (Xiao, 2003), experiment with this approach was underway and proved effective.

Yi interviewees portrayed a more complicated picture than that described in the literature. One male studying Yi-English literature described his early life in a village near a town.

When I started school, both textbooks and classroom language were in Chinese. I was kind of muddleheaded (*Mengde*). I noticed that some kids quickly disappeared from the school. ... In Year 4, Yi was taught two hours per week. I felt much better as it was so easy to us. From then on, I even began take notes [in class] in Yi (Yi-S 2).

So his experience was total immersion in learning all subjects in Chinese without mother tongue, Yi, support in the first few years. When asked why 'some kids' were allowed to disappear in compulsory education he said that no one cared at that time and the notion of

compulsory education had only just been heard the year before. Up in the deep mountains, he continued, the system could be the opposite. The Yi kids used Yi textbooks and were taught in Yi as well. Chinese was only taught as a school subject. Many kids dropped out of school prior to secondary school. In those places, children have to help make a living and, when they grow up, they leave the mountains to become migrant workers, mostly in the cities (Yi-S 6).

When asked if the current promotion of English language programmes in the country has any negative or positive effect on ethnic minority students, most Yi interviewees came up with the reply that they believe it will result in positive outcomes. The following quotes seem to represent the perceptions of the students.

I think it (nation-wide promotion of English language teaching and learning) is a good thing. Language is a tool for communication. One more language, one more pair of hands. ... We Yi students have better pronunciation of English than other students, so this is an advantage. (Yi-S 8)

Some Yi students like the Uyghur student quoted above (Uyghur-S 1) showed keenness to compete in the system but contended that the current situation may not allow them to do so immediately because they are not put on equal footing with the majority:

... the most important is the time we have had in foreign language learning. Most of us began English language learning quite late. It is difficult to catch up with the Han students and the current trend. ... This is just like a race. If they are already half way up the hill and you are still at the foot of the hill, it's *not a fair race* (Yi-S 12, my emphasis).

A COMPARISON

The overview and empirical data have shown many unique features of the policy process from policy formation, implementation to educational outcomes with regard to English language education to minority groups in China. It should become clear that this policy process is distinctive in each region. In Xinjiang, for example, if we make a comparison of the process of implementing the English language education policy with the traditional

Uyghur-Chinese bilingual education policy process using the analytical model proposed before, we are able to demonstrate the differences between the two policy processes and to show the dynamic relationships between the key actors in each process. For the policy process with the aim to promote Chinese-Uyghur bilingual education, all actors specified in the framework are fully mobilised to play their respective roles. The literature and the data show that regional and county-level policy makers carry the policy too far by over-emphasising the promotion of Chinese at the expense of Uyghur. In contrast, the process for implementing policies for promoting English language education is incomplete, with key actors at the Regional and local levels remaining dormant (see Fig. 4) for there is no evidence to show that they have responded to the 2001 national documents for English language promotion. Without active participation of these actors, there is no guarantee for the resources and other preconditions for policy implementation.

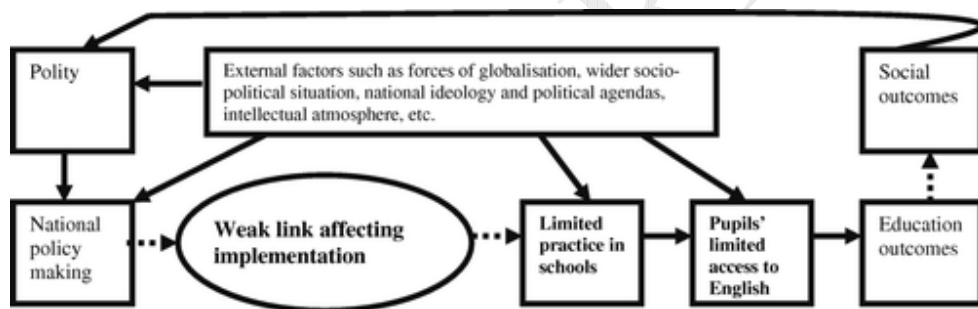


Figure 4. The process for implementing English language education policy in Xinjiang.

With this framework, we see that there is a dynamic relationship between policy makers at different levels in the case of language use and language provision for minority groups. Local authorities, including regional, prefecture and county authorities, apparently know well what national policies should be implemented, even excessively, and what national policies could be paid lip service to or even ignored. Another point that is often neglected but important for understanding the dynamic relationship is the fact that in many cases it is the regional/provincial level policies that may truly reflect the socio-political agendas of the state. A typical example is a ‘bilingual education’ policy made in Xinjiang in 2004 with a strong emphasis on promoting Chinese. It was issued by the Regional authority but,

following the circulation, the Ministry of Education issued a notification to highlight the key points of this policy and to show strong support (Ministry of Education ... 2004). This suggests that many regional level policies for minority groups are state sanctioned policies for the specific region. These policies are made by the 'autonomous region' and, thus, could be less restrained by constitutional mandates.

When we compare the Xinjiang case with the Zhuang, however, we can see that the link is maintained between the national policy on promoting English provision, the regional, the local, and down to the school practice. The Regional Education Authority responded with strategic plans; even in poor areas such as Baise efforts are made by local authorities to train English teachers for schools. Most Zhuang students are kept in the system though it is acknowledged that it surely takes more time to provide pupils in remote areas with English learning opportunities from primary school onwards than those in geographically advantaged regions such as major towns and cities. Yi pupils in Liangshan seem to be in a similar situation, but those in the high maintains are apparently even less fortunate than Zhuang pupils as the latter, even in remote areas, could start learning a foreign language from junior secondary onwards, but the former may not have any opportunity to do this at all during nine years of compulsory education.

What seems in common according to the literature on Yi and Uyghur is the argument for lowering expectations for English proficiency of minority students. It is evident that local policies are implemented in tertiary institutions to accommodate minority students with limited or none foreign language learning experience and strong calls are frequently made by educators and scholars such as Cao & Xiang (2006) and Zhang (2002) for formulating special policies at all levels. In Guangxi, on the other hand, there are rarely such calls for making special policies for the region. It appears that, for the policies to promote English language education at least, Guangxi is better 'structurally incorporated' (Paulston, 1992; see below for discussion of this notion) into the mainstream education system.

DISCUSSION

There are four arguments we wish to make on the basis of this comparative study into the policy processes in these three regions. From the point of view of equality in education for minority groups, our data suggest that the approach adopted by the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region is probably the most beneficial for Zhuang students as its regional policies aim to keep minority students in the national system. To keep them in the system means to provide them an opportunity to be structurally integrated into the mainstream society. Sociolinguists (e.g., Paulston, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1977) make an important distinction between cultural assimilation and structural integration. Cultural assimilation often refers to giving up minority groups' own identity to adopt the mainstream culture. Structural integration, on the other hand, suggests encouraging minority group members to learn the necessary knowledge, skills and competence in the majority language so as to gain equal access to life opportunities and social privileges. Minority groups often find it painful to undergo cultural assimilation but necessary to be structurally integrated into the mainstream society. If this distinction makes sense, it is clearly erroneous to suggest that there should be special policies for minority groups in English language education. Those policies would segregate the minority groups further from the mainstream society and put them on unequal footing for life opportunities.

The second argument is derived from our analysis of the models adopted for promoting Chinese in the three regions. In comparison, we can see that an extension and elaboration of the three Yi models may offer a solution to the dilemma of striking a balance between the minority languages and the national language as they provide a range of options for schools and individual students to create their own language pathways, given that some minority students might prefer to develop standard Chinese as a first language, or very strong competence as a second language, while others might wish to make it a priority to develop the minority language. This flexibility is essential for a minority community to plan for maintenance of its own language and culture and for individuals to negotiate a space for structurally integrating themselves into the society.

What is most astonishing of the empirical data is the evidence of optimism or optimistic expectations expressed by the ethnic minority students about the nation-wide promotion of English language teaching. Contrary to the widespread perception that ethnic minority pupils are poorer foreign/second language learners than their majority counter-parts due not only to lack of resources but also to cognitive, affective and socio-cultural problems they experience in learning a foreign language (Jiang, *et al.*, 2007; Li, 2003; Tian, 2001, Wu, 2002; Xiang *et al.* 2005), empirical data indicate that the students themselves are confident in language learning, especially if the language in question is the one they are motivated to learn. They see their strengths and weaknesses in foreign language learning and take the 'English Fever' as an opportunity for empowering themselves. However, they are aware that they are not 'put on equal footing' with the majority and thus are disadvantaged. The key issue is inequality of conditions which needs addressing. Lynch (cited in Feng, 2008) argues that the notion of equality of opportunities spelled out in most policies is the basic minimum. Preferential policies may improve equality of participation and outcomes but it is the establishment of equality of conditions that can truly 'put the minority groups on equal footing' with the majority group, which would create a real opportunity for equality education.

Finally, with a focus on policy studies, we would reiterate the importance of analysing the policy process in its entirety, which entails evaluation of the key actors in the policy cycle in relation to the variables. As the comparative study shows, when we look into the entire process, we are able to assess its effectiveness by studying the links and identifying inactive or missing links within the social context. This assessment may lead to better insights of policy formulation and implementation. A related issue for analysing language education policies, as evident in this study, is the risk of over-generalisation. It is often tantalising for us to draw conclusions taking a minority group as a homogeneous whole. Take the Yi group for example. The policy process could differ tremendously in the three zones as Teng (2000a; 2000b) defines. Using the analytical model proposed in this paper, we should be able to analyse each zone to demonstrate how contextual factors and actors vary from one zone to another to produce a more accurate account of the situation.

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Notes:

1. It should be noted that while most quotes from the empirical study are transcribed and translated word by word from tape recordings of the interviewees some are reconstructed on the basis of field notes where tape recording was not allowed by the interviewees.
2. The term, Zhongjieyu, is often translated into 'interlanguage' in English, but it is used to refer to the explanatory language used in textbooks and by teachers in classroom English teaching to minority students in China. It is not the learner's systematic knowledge of an L2 that is independent of his/her target language and L1 as is usually defined by linguists such as Davis, Criper & Howatt (1984).
3. Minority students educated in mother tongue from primary school to university, with Chinese only as a school subject, are called *Min Kao Min* students. The *Min Kao Min* system has co-existed with *Min Kao Han* system (minorities educated in Han Chinese) in Autonomous Regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang.

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